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HOCHSCHULE UND WEITERBILDUNG

SCHWERPUNKTTHEMA:

ERFOLGSKONZEPT FERNSTUDIUM:
BETREUUNG,
INDIVIDUALISIERUNG,
METHODENMIX UND VIRTUALITÄT

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A change process initiated by the “e”:

How students at Hamburg University learn to manage their e-moderators

- A case study -

MARION BRUHN-SUHR

1. Introduction

E-learning or online learning within university education in many cases still means provision of written material focusing on the means of refreshing and revisioning lectures and seminars as well as offering add-ons for specific subjects.

In the area of university continuing education we have been experiencing the collaborative and communicative concepts of e-learning which comprises open and reflective discussions among participants as well as with their e-moderators as one of the most important learning components. The participants' individual learning process is also supported by intensive individual feedback on subject specific aspects as well as the communicative and collaborative aspects in a course.

In 2009 the central e-learning office at Hamburg University (ZeB – Zentrales eLearning Büro) developed the idea of an e-learning course based on the collaborative concepts to qualify undergraduate students to become e-tutors. Jointly with the centre for university continuing education of Hamburg University (AWW) they created a course of 90 hours workload partly made of two courses (Virtual Teamwork and Train the E-trainer) which have been successfully presented for many years. It is hoped that in future the qualified e-tutors will motivate and support their teachers in setting up collaborative concepts for their e-learning activities.

In this paper we will discuss some interesting observations and outcomes on the undergraduate students' perceptions of this concept and compare these with postgraduate participants' who have at least 1-2 years working experience in business. The observations are based on the author's own active moderation in three course presentations for undergraduates from 2009 onwards as well as the moderation of numerous e-learning courses for professionals.

2. The AWW e-learning concept based on collaboration and communication

2.1. The AWW concept

The centre for university continuing education (Arbeitsstelle für wissenschaftliche Weiterbildung (AWW)) of Hamburg

University started its e-learning developments in 2002 with a project jointly funded by the national ministry of education and research as well as the Hamburg ministry of science and research. The funding of the project OLIM (Online Learning in Management) ended in 2004 when 12 modules on management issues as well as a module “Train the E-Trainer” had been developed, piloted and evaluated (see http://www.aww.uni-hamburg.de/projekt_olim.html for a detailed project description). The programme OLIM has since been successfully presented by the AWW. The target groups are people with a first university degree and at least 1-2 years working experience. Their subject specific background is diverse and they come from different countries worldwide.

The e-concept for OLIM is based on communication and collaboration in virtual teams. An important component of these e-learning courses is the continuous support by a team of e-moderators who moderate the discussion forums, support the participants' motivation and provide feedback all the way through: on the subject, on the transferability of the discussed cases and concepts into business as well as on the quality of their teamwork. The role of the moderators is very much that of a facilitator of the participants' learning processes.

2.1.1. The module “Virtual Teamwork”

The different OLIM-modules run over a period of five months with a workload of 90 and 150 hours workload respectively. In addition there is a compulsory introductory three weeks (30 hours workload) course on the necessary study skills. The following topics are addressed:

- technical aspects of the learning platform,
- time management issues,
- learning styles,
- success factors and stumbling blocks of virtual teamwork, how to work efficiently in a virtual team and
- reading techniques, note-taking and critical thinking.

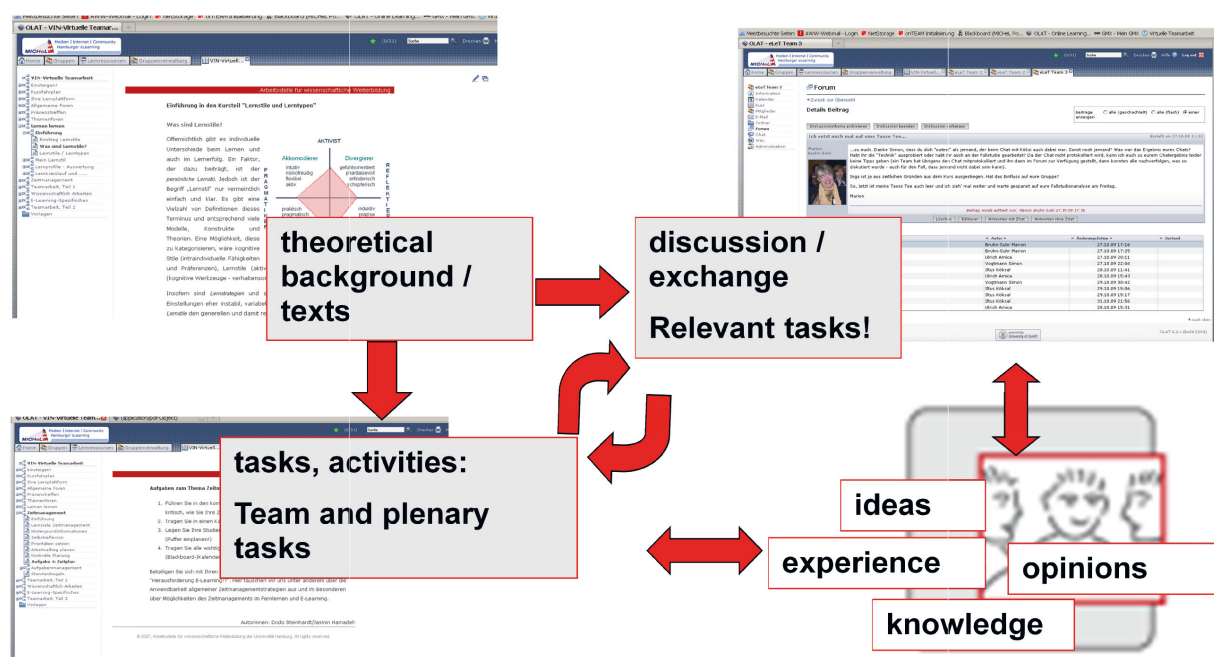


Abb.1: Concept of interaction

In parallel to theoretical input (mostly texts) the participants experience to work in a virtual team and reflect on the theory and how it is transferred into practice when they work on their team assignment which is the case study analysis of a virtual team situation.

2.1.2. The course Train the E-Trainer

The above mentioned course "Train the E-Trainer" (http://www.aww.uni-hamburg.de/Train_the_E-Trainer.html) runs over three months with a workload of 90-120 hours. Target groups are experienced teachers and trainers. The focus of this course is again on "learning by doing and experiencing". The overarching teamwork consists of a concept for an e-learning course. Step by step the participants learn about different possible components and concepts while they experience how the moderators facilitate their individual learning process.

This course imparts the kind of qualification the AWW requires of those academics who apply for an associate lecture-ship to become one of the OLIM- or any other AWW-e-learning modules. Without this or a comparable qualification the AWW would not employ an academic as e-moderator. This was one of the outcomes of the project OLIM regarding quality standards.

2.2. The course eLeT (Virtual skills: from e-Learner to e-Tutor)

Collaborations and communication as mentioned above is in general not the underlying concept of e-lectures and e-seminars at Hamburg University. E-learning here in most cases

stands for (mostly written) material provided via a learning platform to help students refreshing and revisioning the contents or to provide some additional material or latest research results.

This was the starting point when the ZeB developed the idea of an interactive collaborative e-learning course for undergraduate students to qualify them for working as e-tutor. Based on parts of the courses "Virtual Teamwork" and "Train the E-Trainer" the ZeB and the AWW jointly designed the three months course eLeT (90 hours workload) which comprises working in virtual teams as well as the basics of designing and planning a short e-learning unit and testing it with some of their fellow students in the course.

The first presentation was in 2009. Following an information session with details about concept and workload students had one week time to consider their registration for the course. At the end of the week there was a compulsory four hours face to face session. Another face to face session takes place at the end of the three months course.

3. The role of the e-moderators

The concept of all OLIM modules is based on communication and collaboration. The didactic design is based on learning from and with each other and on generating new knowledge. In the learning process the exchange of experience, awareness of different working styles and learning types as well as individual and group reflections play a decisive role.

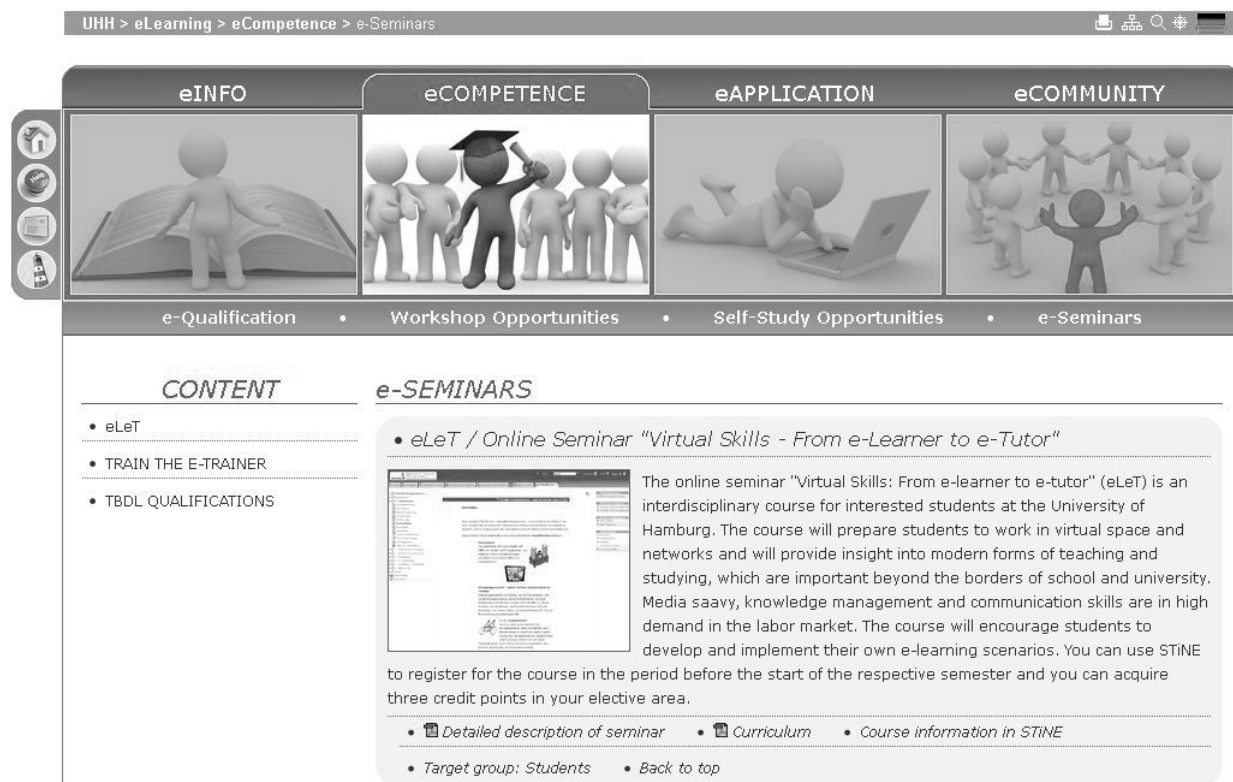


Abb.2: eLeT-website: http://www.uni-hamburg.de/eLearning/eKompetenz/eSeminare_e.html

For the communication and to solve the team tasks participants can use asynchronous as well as synchronous tools of the learning platform.

The learning process is facilitated by the e-moderators. Important tasks of moderation are: continuous feedback, support to keep the motivation, moderation of the discussion process, to help the participants to develop their self learning competence and to provide additional input for the transfer into the work routine.

The AWW participants very much appreciate and profit from the moderator's support. The fact that the moderators are watching and accompanying the teams in their closed team rooms has never been an issue – on the contrary: the participants have always appreciated the support and the certainty that the moderators would intervene if the participants' discussion would gravitate towards a wrong direction. There had also been a few cases where the moderators had explicitly been asked to help with conflicts in the team.

Because of these positive observations within the OLIM-programme we were even more surprised about the undergraduate students' reactions: there was almost no visible discussion or work going on in the team rooms so the moderators proactively sent emails around to find out whether there were any technical or group-related problems:

„We didn't want the e-moderator to see what and how we are discussing the course content or how we cope with our assignments. E-moderators are teachers, they mark and assess our work and we only want to present results of our work when we are convinced that these are optimal, the best we can produce for the time being.“

„An e-moderator is a person „in power“ and he or she stands on the other side“.

At the beginning of the course eLeT the traditional students obviously did not envisage the facilitation in the moderator's role but rather that of a teacher who marks assignments but is not interested in the individual students' learning development. At the end of the course though a change process had started and they saw the advantages of our e-moderator concept but there was also skepticism regarding the high demand in performance and workload.

„I have really sensed that the moderators wanted me to learn something but it was too much work and it was not bachelor-like.“

4. Feedback culture

The undergraduate students did not expect a detailed feedback on their tasks. They had expected some kind of mark and possibly a specimen solution to compare with their own. They were rather surprised that the moderators saw themselves rather as a facilitator who provides constructively critiquing feedback which helps the student to further develop.

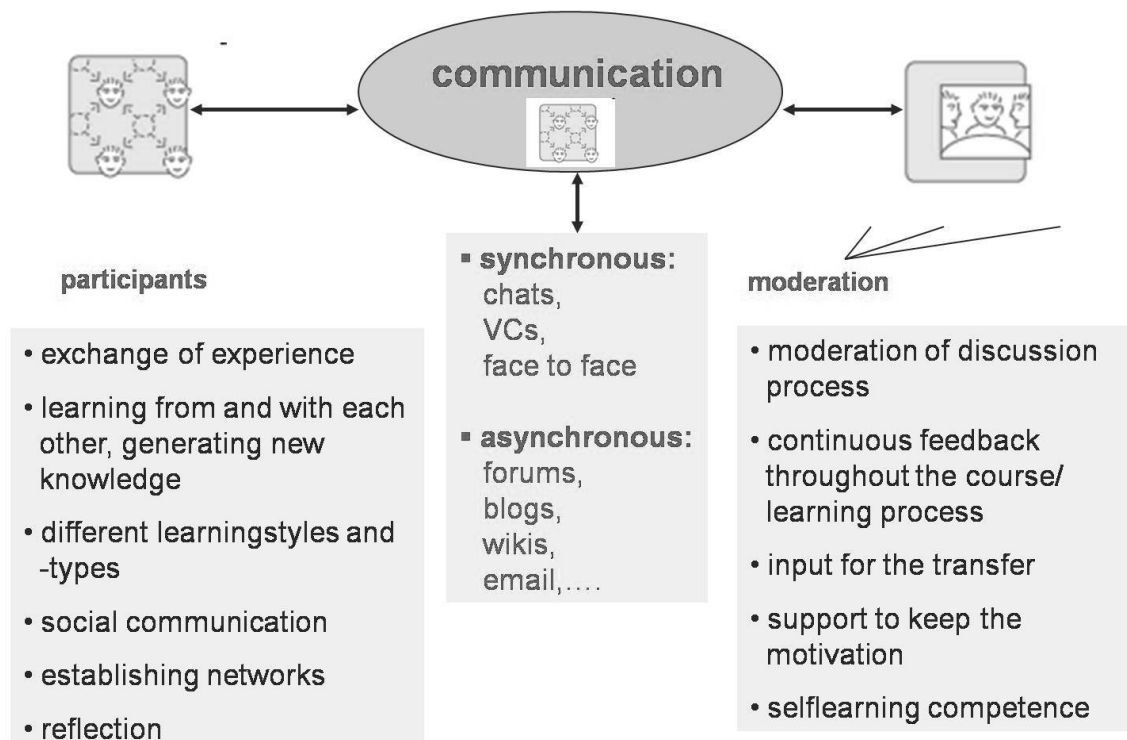


Abb.3: Communication

„Wow, I have never experienced so detailed feedback, this is really helpful for future learning experiences.“

Of course the course work needs to be assessed: this is done by a series of individual, team and plenary tasks plus a final end of course assessment (usually a case study analysis or the concept of an e-learning unit). In general students have to submit at least two substantial postings per discussion forum as a precondition for the certificate. The moderators remind them in time when there are postings missing.

handle platform tools: e.g. even the younger undergraduate students did have difficulties to use Wikis and overall we observed that the participants did have more inhibitions due to their anxiety to cause technical problems than the undergraduate students but on the other hand their activities are sometimes more efficient because of their more reflective way of learning.

4.1. Comparison of the two target groups

The differences between the two groups are summarized in the following table:

How can we explain the different feedback perceptions of the two groups and what are possible conclusions?

- For both groups it was important to get a certificate of successful participation as well as the ECTS-points (European Credit Point System) at the end.
- There was no big difference in the competence to

	Undergraduate students	Postgraduate students / participants with working experience in business
Age	20-25 years	>25 years
Life and work experience	School/university	Business world
Course fee	No fee	Comparatively high course fee
Role of a moderator	Person who values	facilitator who is trying to empower me as a participant/student and who will guide me through the course
Feedback	Marking and assessing	Pointing at areas of improvement and advice how best to achieve that

The comparison and evaluation of the course presentation for both groups demonstrated that there is big scope for improvement regarding the undergraduates' learning processes through feedback.

4.2. Initiating a change process

At the end of the course the students obviously valued the learning experience. The question arising was: "How to improve the students' competence to manage their e-moderator right from the beginning?" We decided to take the following three steps for the latest presentation in summer 2012:

- We provided especially detailed information about the concept of moderation and the roles of e-moderators including the intended learning process.
- Right at the beginning during the first face to face meeting we let the students experience how they can use the competence of the e-moderators by setting up little tasks and activities which were then supported by the moderators.
- We decided not to grade the student's work, only a pass or non-pass for individual assignments were given but they all received detailed feedback on the quality of their work.

In some cases students needed graded certificates within their programme of study. For these we had decided to mark the final group work which was assessed and graded by both, moderators and students.

The response on the students' side was considerable:

- They openly discussed almost everything via the platform and did not hesitate to involve the moderators. They were keen on really understanding the feedback in order to improve their active learning.
- Continuous feedback added to the students' motivation, the drop-out rate was much lower than before.
- Continuous facilitation raised the quality of student's learning outcomes.
- Some students were frustrated about their traditional learning situation after having experienced the difference.

Of course we did not manage to make all participating students powerful learners who intensively "use" the e-moderators' competences but the obvious better learning results are worth the effort.

5. Conclusions

The experiences and developments over four semesters were promising. We could demonstrate that there is quite a potential to empower students to become self-confident learners using the up-to-date media and web 2.0 concepts to become competent and efficient in generating new knowledge and in establishing powerful networks. Of course the presentation costs are high with a team of well-trained e-moderators but learning outcomes are much better in quality. Maybe the newly trained e-tutors can take over at least part of the moderators' roles in future to make this concept financially feasible.

The „e“ was crucial to set this development in motion because the traditional academics would not think about this type of student support and intensive individual feedback.

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